

Waste Paper

Sometimes what is lost might have radically changed the accepted chronologies and perspectives of art history, particularly when, as was the case with Georges Braque, the artist is reticent and not inclined to draw attention to the gaps in the record – or even to recognise that the objects in question were significant.

Braque, along with his close friend Pablo Picasso, created cubism in the years before the First World War. It was a style that revolutionised the representation of objects and space and played a critical role in shaping subsequent art movements, influencing particularly the development of constructivism, abstraction and dada. Key to cubism was a rejection of traditional perspective that had dominated western conceptions of art since the Middle Ages. Even as late as 1954 Braque could speak to the art historian John Richardson with passion about this point. ‘The whole Renaissance tradition is repugnant to me’, he said.

The hard-and-fast rules of perspective which it succeeded in imposing on art were a ghastly mistake which it has taken four centuries to redress; Cézanne and after him, Picasso and myself can take a lot of the credit for this. Scientific perspective is nothing but eye-fooling illusionism; it is simply a trick – a bad trick – which makes it impossible for artists to convey a full experience of space, since it forces the objects in a picture to disappear away from the beholder instead of bringing them within his reach, as painting should. Perspective is too mechanical to allow one to take full possession of things. It has its origins in a single viewpoint and never gets away from it ... When we arrived at this conclusion, everything changed – you have no idea how much.

Braque met Picasso in Paris in 1907 but their friendship did not blossom until late 1908. In 1910–12 they began to collaborate very closely, discussing pictorial problems on a daily basis and attempting to solve them in ways that were uncharacteristic of their personalities and individual styles. For a period, they did not sign the fronts of their canvases, wanting their works to be seen as indistinguishable. Together, in the so-called analytic phase of cubism that lasted from 1908 to 1912, they rendered their barely recognisable subjects – still life arrangements of objects or people – as schematic facets and planes that existed within a shallow pictorial space. By early 1913 all sense of atmosphere and three-dimensional illusionism was eliminated from their paintings and, in the phase known as synthetic cubism, Braque and Picasso represented objects through symbols or signs, and worked with flat panels of colour.

The story of the deep friendship between Braque and Picasso and of their achievements in this period has become a cornerstone of the history of modern art.

Ironically, however, we know relatively little about the nature of the exchanges between the two men beside some later reminiscences, brief references in letters and the visual evidence of surviving works. It is for this reason that the loss of all of Braque's paper constructions – a development he pioneered but which was then taken up and made famous by Picasso – is so important historically: without knowing what Braque's constructions were like, or exactly when they were made or how many there were, a significant part of the history of the development of cubism, and, in particular of cubist sculpture and of Braque's role in this, remains shadowy.

So what exactly is known about Braque's paper constructions? In a letter written in the summer of 1912 to his dealer Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler Braque wrote:

I am working well and taking advantage of my stay in the country to do things that cannot be done in Paris, such as paper sculpture, something that has given me much satisfaction.

Kahnweiler, who was a close confidant, later referred to Braque having started to make these constructions in 1911; and Braque himself said the same to the art historian John Richardson. In a letter of 1911 Braque wrote in an aside that he was making 'mes papiers peints'. This would normally mean wallpaper, but, as he did not make wallpaper, the phrase seems to allude to his creation of painted paper constructions. The first such construction, Braque was later reported to have said, was of a single object (a guitar or a violin) made with bits of paper and cardboard, which were cut, folded and painted.

Furthermore, around 1911 Picasso began to use the nickname 'Wilbour Wright' for Braque – after the American brothers Orville and Wilbur Wright who designed and built the first successful fixed wing airplane – more and more frequently (Braque even took to signing his letters to Kahnweiler 'Wilbour'). Linking the private joke to Braque's recent invention of paper constructions, art historian Alex Danchev comments, 'Braque's pioneering paper sculptures apparently reminded [Picasso] of the amazing and equally flimsy contraptions flown by the Wright brothers in their efforts to go further, faster, higher than anyone had been before without feathers, utilising as it seemed only a few spars and struts held together with a dab of glue'.

Beyond these brief references – and the inferences that have been drawn from them – there exists also a single photograph of one of Braque's later paper constructions. This photograph shows a three-dimensional table top scene set on a tilted triangular base, which is supported invisibly in a corner between two walls in Braque's Paris studio. Most easily recognised in this cubist still life is a bottle made of newsprint, presumably mounted onto card so that it stands upright and away from the wall. The lettering on the 'label' references Martini but punningly shows only the letters 'ART' – a self-referential joke making the claim that the object was indeed art in case anyone had any doubts. In front of the bottle is a hard-to-decipher three-dimensional vertical shape, which appears from the photograph to have sides and a back. Intriguingly, it

seems to pass through the dark table-top and end with a folded-over, and possibly stapled, bottom edge. To the right of the bottle is an L-shaped piece of white paper. One edge has been curled around imaginatively to create the flute of a lop-sided wine glass; an arc drawn on the horizontal part of the paper delineates the glass's base, while a very visible drawing pin fixes the extreme edge of the paper to the right-hand wall – puncturing any sense that the artist might have wanted to create a credible illusion of a glass. Behind the glass can be seen a piece of the newspaper *Le Matin*. Its date – 18 February 1914 – shows us that the work could only have been made between then and early August when Braque enlisted in the French army.

It was a complex work, filled with cubist play with depth and flatness, solidity and transparency, and combining different levels of legibility. But Braque did not bother to preserve this or any other of his constructions. After a visit to Braque's studio in 1914, Kahnweiler recorded seeing a number of constructions – 'reliefs in wood, in paper, or in cardboard' – and so it seems that a significant body of work was lost, presumably thrown out at some stage by the artist. Nor did Braque make any effort to have them recorded for posterity in any way: the photograph discussed above is the sole known surviving image and it was published only in 1982 – and, somewhat unluckily, nobody else did either. (Picasso, the more outgoing of the two and latterly more in the public eye, was more fortunate in this respect: some of his key paper constructions were captured in photographs of his studio reproduced in newspapers of the period).

Why was Braque so careless about works he evidently spent a good deal of time making? According to reported later conversations, it was because he did not see himself as a sculptor and considered the constructions not as works of art but merely as tools to help him think through certain pictorial problems. It seems that he may have based some paintings not on observed reality but on the ideas and compositions he had worked out in his paper and cardboard constructions. Furthermore, Braque was driven by the desire simply to paint; and unlike Picasso he did not feel compelled to hoard and document his works. Although the Spaniard did not manage to keep all his early paper constructions, he certainly kept some, storing them safely in boxes. When he donated his cardboard guitar to the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1973, it arrived in a clothing box that dated from 1913 and was presumably the same one in which he had first stored the sculpture. As Danchev notes, the fragile work had survived 'sixty years of upheavals and migrations, two world wars, two wives, innumerable mistresses, and passing fashions', protected within its box.

Braque's making of three-dimensional constructions was a key step in the development of cubism. It was related to, and seems to have anticipated, the use of real elements in cubist paintings (famously, the collaged oil cloth printed to look like chair caning in Picasso's *Still Life with Chair Caning* 1912). It also predated Picasso's modelled guitar made from flat planes. And yet the Frenchman's pioneering role was not fully credited or even known at the time. In 1913 four of Picasso's constructions made from wood, cardboard, paper and string were published, causing an outcry in the arts magazine *Les Soirées de Paris* (the works seemed to be neither paintings nor proper sculptures

and were rather flimsily made to boot). The photographs and word of mouth, however, ensured that Picasso's radical and seemingly iconoclastic works became widely known; and artists from various countries, eager to learn about latest trends, visited Picasso in his studio to see them. Although it had been the sense that the paper and card constructions were not really sculpture but something new that had made them quickly famous, Picasso reworked one of his better known constructions in more durable materials: made of sheet metal and wire, *Guitar* 1914 can be seen as a conscious attempt by the Spanish artist to ensure the longevity of his work. Braque's role in all this was overlooked and later more or less forgotten.

Circumstance also played a role here. Braque was severely wounded in the head in May 1915 and took several years to recover. His close friendship with Picasso could not be reconstituted, and in the meantime the latter had become increasingly famous, outshining his early artistic partner. Also, Braque was temperamentally disinclined to boast or to compete: what mattered to him in relation to Picasso was the friendship and collaborative spirit that had propelled their joint invention of cubism. Others, including on occasion Picasso himself, were inclined to present Braque as a less inventive artist, a mere foil to the fiery Spaniard's greater genius. However, had some of his innovative constructions survived, or had more photographs of them existed, it seems safe to say that Braque's reputation and position in the history of the development of modern art (particularly in relation to the beginnings of cubism, and, by extension, later constructivist sculpture and even pop art) might well have been rebalanced in his favour.

Text—
Jennifer Mundy